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Theme Session Proposal for 2016 Design Research Society conference, Brighton, UK.

The Politics of Commoning and Designing

Theme Chairs: Bianca Elzenbaumer, Valeria Graziano, Kim Trogal

This theme aims to bring together practitioners, activists and researchers to explore the tensions and potentialities around commoning in design and the (re)production of 'community economies'. As De Angelis (2007) and others point out, commons are today thought as the basis on which to build social justice, environmental sustainability and a good life for all. But they, just as 'community economies' (J.K. Gibson-Graham and Roelvink, 2011), operate within a world dominated by capital's priorities and are thus also sites of struggle as well as targets of co-optation and enclosure.

We invite papers that relate to the following questions:

What are the tensions and contradictions we encounter or create when designing for the commons?

In activating commons to create and sustain alternative livelihoods, how does the role of designers change as well?

If we take the commons and 'community economies' as a tool rather than as a goal, what do they allow us to contribute to?

What practices of self-organization and division of labour are useful in getting people involved in commoning for progressive social change?

This panel wants to focus on, amongst other things, how design relates to new forms of enclosure, struggles and social justice, and the reproductive labour necessary to care for commons. It seeks to benefit practitioners who want to imagine alternative ways of making their livelihoods away from waged relations and professionalism, and those who are questioning the role of the designer as a problem solver not implicated in the "community" s/he interacts with.

BACKGROUND

Whenever the commons are discussed in the context of design, the discourse tends to privilege certain aspects of the theory as proposed by authors such as Elinor Ostrom or the P2P Foundation. While these sources provide some useful guidance and rules that are readily applicable by designers to their professional practices, the lack of inclusion of other perspectives risks leaving some significant political aspects unaddressed in theory and practice. The basic conditions in which workers and students within design are now operating (e.g. regulatory capitalism, which is making commoning, self-provisioning and ad-hoc arrangements increasingly hard in urban environments) are also seldom included in the conversation. Topics such as new forms of enclosures, struggles and social justice, or the reproductive labour necessary to care for commons, for instance, as discussed by Midnight Notes (1990), Federici (2011), Harvey (2012), Negri and Hardt (2009), Harney and Moten (2013) and Dardot and Laval (2014) are rarely touched upon. However, without a rigorous engagement with these issues, commoning risks being transformed into a “feel good” label for projects that are only mildly capable of meeting the pressing issues faced by society today.

CHAIRS' SHORT BIOS

Dr Bianca Elzenbaumer

Bianca is a Research Fellow at Leeds College of Art. She completed her MA at the Royal College of Art and gained a PhD in Design (2014) from Goldsmiths, University of London, which was supported with a fellowship by the Design Department. Bianca is co-director of the design practice Brave New Alps (with Fabio Franz). With Alison Thomson and Maria Portugal, she coordinates the PhD by Design conferences and study days. She has taught on the MA Design & Environment at Goldsmiths and on the BA contextual studies module The Expanded Designer at Camberwell College of Art. Her current research engages with transformative activations of diverse economies and the commons within the creative industries as well as in rural areas.

Dr Valeria Graziano

Valeria is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Middlesex University. She holds a PhD in Critical Organization Theory (2014) from Queen Mary University London, which was supported by a Creative Industries Research scholarship by the same university.

She co-directed Summer Drafts - Laboratories of Transversal Vivacity (2008-2012) and the practice exchange series Self.Organizing (2011). She has been active in the Micropolitics Research Group (2007-2012), the Carrot Workers Collective (2006-2012) and the Radical Education Forum (2011-ongoing). Her current research looks at formats of collective practice and how certain micropolitical, aesthetic and somatic dispositives can impact autonomous organization.

Dr Kim Trogal

Kim is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at Central Saint Martins. She completed her architectural studies at University of Sheffield, including a PhD in Architecture (2012) for which she was awarded the RIBA LKE Ozolins Studentship. Kim is co-editor, with Prof. Doina Petrescu, of the book 'The Social (Re)Production of Architecture' (Routledge, Forthcoming). Kim is also a Postdoctoral Research Assistant at the Sheffield School of Architecture with Prof. Irena Bauman, researching Local Resilience. Kim has worked in architectural practice and taught at Sheffield School of Architecture. Kim's current research, 'Common Products' investigates the intersection of ethics, economies and culture.

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